

'We deserve to be angry': College students rally against funding cuts at the Capitol



Advocate Photo by MARK BALLARD -- Jesse Elliott, from LSU-Alexandria, addresses Wednesday a rally in support of stable funding for colleges and universities.

BY Elizabeth Crisp

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Louisiana college students shouted Wednesday from the State Capitol steps and took turns pleading with members of a key legislative budget panel to avoid potentially catastrophic cuts to higher education funding in the coming year.

"We're sending a message today that we're taking notice of this," said Jesse Elliott, Student Government president at LSU-Alexandria.

About 150 students took part in the rally against cuts to higher education funding on the third day of the state Legislature's 2015 session.

Lawmakers are working to craft a spending plan for the budget that begins July 1. But with Louisiana facing an estimated \$1.6 billion shortfall, spending for colleges

and universities could end up on the chopping block.

Under what has been described as a “[doomsday scenario](#),” higher education funding would be slashed by 82 percent — leaving just \$123 million to be divvied up among the state’s colleges and universities. Currently, the state sends nearly \$1 billion to campuses.

Higher education funding in Louisiana already [has](#) been slashed by 34 percent since 2008.

“The state has asked us to do more with less, and we’ve done that, but now you’re asking us to do more with nothing,” said Grambling State University Student Government President Eric Johnson.

About 150 students, representing all four college systems, gathered on the Capitol steps waving signs that read “No Funds, No Future,” “No cuts,” and the more colorful “Katrina didn’t close UNO but the cuts can” and “Don’t (expletive) with my education.” Some wore medical scrubs; many wore their school colors.

Students from the University of New Orleans appeared to make up a large portion of the crowd. The LSU student newspaper [expressed frustration](#) that there were not more students from LSU’s Baton Rouge campus in attendance.

Several students testified in the House Appropriations Committee about seeing overworked faculty leave the state for better jobs, watching friends drop out of college because they could no longer afford it and worrying about the value of their degrees.

“We have professors leaving throughout the semester,” said Morgan Miller, McNeese State Student Government vice president. “That should not be happening.

Legislators mostly listened to the students’ stories as they flowed one after the other.

Rep. John Schroder, R-Covington, said the Legislature has little control because of constitutional dedications that protect other areas of the budget but leave higher education vulnerable.

“Eighty-five to 90 percent of our money is already tied up in some dedication,” he said. “All of those dedications have a constituency — you name it, they’re out there. ... Our hands are tied.”

Gov. Bobby Jindal was in Ruston for an economic development announcement during the rally.

“We appreciate all of the students who spoke out today in support of our colleges

and universities,” Jindal’s spokeswoman Shannon Bates Dirmann said in a statement. “It’s a great thing when students take part in the democratic process.”

Jindal’s executive budget recommendation has about a \$211 million gap in funding for higher education, but it relies on the state scaling back some tax breaks for businesses. That plan remains uncertain as legislators weigh their options for finding additional funding for higher education.

Colleges and universities also are seeking the authority to set their own fees and tuition.

“We have presented a budget that cuts over \$500 million in corporate welfare,” Dirmann said of Jindal’s proposal. “Our budget prioritizes higher education and health care ahead of corporate welfare. There are also additional solutions we are supportive of that will protect higher education.”

David Teagle, Student Government president at the University of New Orleans, said he’s angry over the threat of cuts.

“We deserve to be angry,” he said.

He described the dire funding situation as the “theft of the future of Louisiana.”

“I have two children,” he said. “The people in this building have stolen from their futures.”

He said he knows students who work already two or three jobs just to pay for college.

“This is the breaking point,” he said. “We have to draw the line.”

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